"The Date on the Label"
I Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35
April 26, 2020
Hamden Plains United Methodist Church, Hamden, Connecticut
The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

George was an outstanding baseball player. Since he was a kid, he was the best: in Little League, Babe Ruth League, in high school. In the minors he was the prospect everyone said would make it big. And he did. Twelve seasons in the majors. At 35, he still looked strong and fit and he could still hit. But in the field he knew, and those closest to him knew, that his reflexes were not instantaneous. Balls he formerly caught were getting past him. And the clock was ticking….

Helen was a motivational speaker, contracted by major corporations to inspire the troops and their performance. Her enthusiasm and entertaining speaking style paid well enough to afford her and her family a comfortable lifestyle. But during a couple of busy weeks she noticed that her throat was dry. No matter how much water she drank or how much she rested, it was always dry. A burning sensation followed. She scheduled a doctor's appointment, sure that medication would fix her up. But the problem required surgery and, with it, the risk that Helen – who made her living with her voice – might not be able to speak again. And the clock was ticking….

Dr. Edwin had two gifts: small, nimble hands and brilliant mind, making him a leading surgeon. He was a miracle worker, until the morning he could not work a miracle on himself. He could not roll over in bed. He could not lift his hand. He had had a stroke. A "light episode," they said. Most function would return, they said. He might need a little therapy, they said. Could he operate again? Would people trust him? Could he trust himself? And the clock was ticking….

Change the names. Rearrange the occupations. Change the ailments. It all sounds disarmingly familiar. We are perishable. Our abilities are perishable. Yet we sometimes act as though we will be the one person to beat the system. My late father, as strong a man as

any – physically, emotionally, spiritually – and stronger than most, said *"God is the originator of planned obsolescence."* It's hard to argue.

Even without COVID-19, we encounter it daily. It's the date on the label, an indicator of product viability and a reminder that nothing lasts forever (except love, which I'll get to by and by).

I recently put new batteries in an appliance. It still didn't work. I was about to chuck the small appliance when I noticed the date on the label of the batteries which said, "Best if used by January, 2002." I guess they weren't at their best. How many of us have reached into the pantry for an item, noticed a bit more dust than we expected on it, and then turned it to read "Sell by April 30." "2011." Even "sell by" dates, a constant source of controversy among consumers, remind us that, past a certain date, quality diminishes.

Still, Eastertide is the season of new birth and new beginnings. Look at today's scriptures. Using an agrarian metaphor, First Peter tells us that we have been born anew of imperishable seed through the living and enduring Word of God. This is not the endurance of ink on a page, but the Word of God as in *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God…and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* **(John 1:1, 14a)** God's Word is a living truth, an enduring message that resists tarnish, rust or corrosion. Revealed most uniquely in Jesus Christ – love in the flesh – God's Word never fails, sputters or falls apart. Unlike our batteries and foodstuffs, there is no expiration date on the label of love.

If you're like me, that's a reminder you need to hear again. And again. Because in this season, in this 100 year pandemic, death is all around us. And we are sometimes absent-minded or hard of hearing, both about our mortality and the promise of eternity that outlives our expiration date.

Certainly it was a reminder that Clopas and his companion needed to hear in today's Gospel from Luke. Trudging towards the village of Emmaus, they were sad because of Jesus' death. Their teacher, their leader, the one they had hoped would redeem Israel

was gone. They were so despondent, or the resurrection of Jesus so mysterious – and perhaps a little of both – that they didn't recognize him when he joined them on the road. But when they told Jesus – still not recognizable to them – of all these events, Jesus gave them a bit of tough love:

"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?"
(Luke 24:25-26)

And then Jesus laid on them the Mother of all Bible studies:

"Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures." **(Luke 24:27)**

Jesus' promise is not a life without death. He, himself, died that we might live. Jesus' promise is that he walks with us, as he did with those disciples on the road to Emmaus at their greatest hour of need. And that time will come, sooner or later, because the clock is ticking for all of us. As John Donne famously wrote,

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

17th meditation from *"Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,"* 1623

Yet we don't know what date is on our label, do we? We don't know the day or the hour we will be called home. So, knowing we have a date, even though it is not given to us to know "when," can galvanize us to do the very best with what we have, making the very most of every moment, with First Peter's certainty that we are reborn of imperishable seed through the Word of God. The words of this prayer that I prayed at a graveside service this past Monday say it precisely:

Since we know not what a day may bring forth, but only that the hour for serving thee is always present, may we wake to the instant claims of thy holy will, not waiting for tomorrow, but yielding today.

The Book of Worship for Church and Home, 1964

So how is it that we *"wake to the instant claims of thy holy will, not waiting for tomorrow, but yielding today."* I don't think there's a "one-size-fits-all" answer. But an answer can be found in this story told by the late Fred Craddock **(April 30, 1028 – March 6, 2015),** Bandy Professor of Preaching and New Testament in the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. Rev. Craddock was a guest lecturer out-of-town and on Sunday went to the church closest to his hotel. It was a modest chapel: warm, friendly but not elaborate.

When worship began, the choir entered followed by the minister. Craddock was shocked. The minister was probably 6'4" and 280-300 pounds. His most noticeable feature was a stumbling, lumbering gait: awkward, almost falling, with long useless arms at this side. His head was misshapen and his hair askew. When he faced the congregation, Craddock could see he looked through thick glasses. He held the book near his nose to read. It seemed as though he was pushing the words out. But all those traits disappeared into the background as he read those familiar words from Paul's love poem in I Corinthians: *"…and the greatest of these is love."*

As a preaching professor, Craddock noted that he would probably have given this pastor a "C" grade. It was not prophetic or poetic but it was pastoral, warm and full of love and affection. What really caught Craddock's attention was the relationship of pastor and people: engaged with one another, and Craddock with them.

How could this preacher, with so much against him physically, be so captivating? How could he be so full of love?

After worship, Craddock lingered to speak with the preacher. He overheard one of the women of the congregation who seemed to be having the same trouble as Craddock, reconciling this preacher's unattractive physical presence with his magnetic spiritual presence. The woman said, *"I wish I could know your mother"* and the preacher replied, *"My mother's name is Grace."*

After everyone left, Craddock and the preacher visited for a few minutes. Craddock said, *"That was an unusual response you gave to that woman, 'My mother's name is Grace.'"*

"Was it?" replied the preacher. *"When I was born, I was put up for adoption at the Department of Family Services. But as you might imagine, nobody wanted to adopt me. So I went from foster home to foster home, and when I was about 16 or 17, I saw some young people going into church. I wanted to be with young people so I went in, and there I met grace—the grace of God."*

The grace of God. God's love freely given. It's for everyone. Now. Today. *"May we wake to the instant claims of thy holy will, not waiting for tomorrow but yielding today."* Today. You see, it doesn't matter if you're young or old…male or female….able or differently-abled….rich or poor….schooled in school or schooled in life….gay or straight….or one of the many colors of the palette of color with which God has painted the faces of humanity. Grace. That's why First Peter said we have new birth from imperishable seed. Grace. That's why Jesus gave the Mother of All Bible Studies when he expounded the scriptures on the Emmaus Road. Grace. God's love never gives out and never gives in. Since the dawn of time we have tried to build our lives on perishable foundations that move and shift life sand: appearance, strength, success, fame. But when we live in God, it is the chance to sow new possibilities, to see life differently, to meet our mother, "Grace."

Our time, however long we have, is short. Our label is dated. Stake our life on the living Word of God by living love. Now. Today. Amen.